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FM AMEMBASSY BEIJING
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5345
INFO RUEHOO/CHINA POSTS COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 009091

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/15/2031

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KCUL SOCI CH

SUBJECT: PLAGIARIZE OR PERISH? SCANDALS ROIL CHINESE ACADEMIA

REF: BEIJING 8115

Classified By: Political Section Internal Unit Chief Kin W. Moy. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Headline-grabbing scandals have erupted at the most prestigious Chinese universities as a wave of plagiarism and academic misconduct is stimulating sharp debate on campuses, in courtrooms and in the media. The Propaganda Department has banned coverage of one case involving a prominent law professor with ties to top Party brass who stands accused of stealing swaths of scholarly text from a dissident's legal writings. Such high profile cases, however, only represent the tip of the corruption iceberg, contacts said. A "publish or perish" mentality has spawned a cottage industry of academic journals that survives on kickbacks from professors who need their theses to appear in print. The controversies are reverberating beyond campus. Recent unethical conduct in academia, which average Chinese people view as a bastion of honesty in a society rife with corruption, has prompted discussion among scholars about the deterioration of the moral state of Chinese civic life overall. End Summary.

Scholars Behaving Badly

¶2. (SBU) Foreign and official Mainland media outlets reported May 12 that the Chinese Government has determined Professor Chen Jin, a famous young scientist at Jiaotong University in Shanghai, fabricated important high-tech research findings in 2003 and 2004. The high-profile case is the latest in a series of scandals roiling China's top universities. When Liu Hui, an assistant dean at Tsinghua University's medical school, was fired in April amid charges of plagiarism and lying about his qualifications, a media uproar ensued. Several of Beijing's major high-circulation dailies ran articles about the case. China Newsweek used the scandal as a springboard for a 20-page cover spread about academic misconduct entitled "The Extraordinary Corruption of Higher Education." The segment included a sidebar listing recent prominent cases besides that of Liu:

-- After six Ph.D. students posted an open letter on the Internet accusing well-known Nanjing University Professor Pan Zhichang of plagiarizing another scholar's research on Chinese classical literature, the school opened an investigation into Pan in March. The probe is ongoing.

-- In December 2005, Fudan University doctoral student

Zhang Zhi'an accused Xiamen's Shantou University media studies Professor Hu Xingrong of copying content from Zhang's thesis for an article Hu published in Hong Kong on China's most influential media managers. Hu publicly apologized to Zhang and resigned his post.

-- In November 2005, Shen Luwei, a Professor at Tianjin Foreign Language Institute, was found guilty in Tianjin Intermediate Court of plagiarizing a thesis published in 1981 by Professor Zhou Yuzhu of Henan University. The language institute "relieved Shen of his teaching duties" and imposed other unspecified "major disciplinary" measures.

From Classroom to Courtroom

¶3. (C) But more than any of these scandals, foreign media and Chinese intellectual circles have fastened on the plagiarism case involving Zhou Yezhong, a law professor at Wuhan University. Zhou, a renowned constitutional law specialist, has briefed President Hu Jintao and other top leaders about legal issues, press reports said. But last year, legal scholar and dissident Wang Tiancheng charged that Zhou's most recent book contains large segments that were copied from Wang's own work. "I was leafing through the new book and saw passages that were mine," Wang told Poloff. His first step was to write an e-mail to Zhou seeking an explanation. No response came, Wang said. Next he decided to go to the media with his complaint. Contacts related that after a small item appeared in the Beijing News about the matter, the Propaganda Department barred further coverage and fined the

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journalist and three editors at the paper RMB 2,000 (USD 250) each. The reason: Publicly discrediting Zhou would be embarrassing to top leaders, some of whom enjoys close relations with Zhou, journalists told us. With media coverage not forthcoming, Wang decided to go to court, he said. His case will reportedly be heard sometime in May.

¶4. (C) The influential biweekly Caijing Magazine is strongly considering running an article in its next issue about the Wang-Zhou case, said Wang Feng (protect), an editor at Caijing. Academic misconduct is commonplace, but this case has gotten political, Wang said, adding that many intellectuals dislike Zhou. They view him as arrogant and sycophantic, not interested in honest scholarship. Wang said Caijing's editors are aware of the Propaganda Department's ban and of the Beijing News reprimand. But he added that Caijing always looks for ways to test the rules and expand the space for free speech. As such, the magazine is betting that a straight report on the court proceedings, without editorial comment, will make it past the censors. In any case, there is no love lost in the newsroom or among intellectuals for Zhou. "People want to see him fall," Wang observed.

Tip of the Iceberg, Exposed by the Internet

¶5. (C) The cases that get media play (or unwelcome attention from the censors) represent the tip of the corruption iceberg, said Yang Yusheng, a professor of American Studies at China University of Political Science and Law. "Dishonesty in academia has been a problem for years," Yang told Poloff, adding that the crisis extends beyond professors failing to cite their sources. Yang said misconduct on Chinese campuses takes many forms, including students submitting essays and theses they bought from Internet sites, students bribing doctoral review panels, sexual harassment,

admissions fraud and other unlawful behavior.

¶6. (C) One change in recent years is the emergence of the Internet, which can play a watchdog role. In fact, the first doubts about Chen's research arose when a whistleblower questioned the findings in a chat room. In this context, Yang said he brought Academic Criticism (www.acriticism.com) online in 2004 in part to expose suspect scholarship. The aim of the site and the two web logs Yang operates is to give scholars throughout China a forum for open debate on such issues. The site regularly carries links to essays in which professors challenge the work of their counterparts. Although Yang has not shied away from posting sensitive content (such as articles by controversial Zhongshan University Professor Yuan Weishi, see reftel), the Zhou Yezhong case has yet to receive treatment on the site. In addition to Yang, notable free lance writer and former science researcher Fang Zhouzi maintains a web log hosted by Sohu.com that chronicles misconduct in Chinese higher education. The address, however, is intermittently blocked in the Mainland, said Zhou Qing'an (protect), a regular contributor to the Beijing News who will begin teaching at Tsinghua University's School of Journalism and Communication in fall of this year.

Plagiarize or Be Poor?

¶7. (C) Zhou will be working on a campus that remains rattled by the Liu Hong case, said Professor Shi Anbin (protect) of the university's School of Journalism and Communications. Shi acknowledged that plagiarism is plaguing in academia, arguing that the root of the problem is increased pressure to "publish or perish." Promotion can hinge on how prolific, and printable, a scholar is. College administrations evaluate professors every three years, Shi said, adding that while teachers are rarely fired, institutions rate them based on academic output, including the number of scholarly papers they publish. Moreover, the Ministry of Education assesses every university annually for performance. Part of the MOE analysis equation includes the number of published papers a school's instructors produce. Money is at stake. The MOE links the amount of funds it allocates to a given institution to the school's overall rating, Shi said.

¶8. (C) Most universities require professors and doctoral students to publish articles in so-called key

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academic journals as often as three times a year, the China Newsweek article reported. The piece went on to assert that even the least reputable publications can thrive on kickbacks from professors who want to ensure their work sees print. A recent Ministry of Science survey found that of 180 people with doctorates, some 60 percent admitted to paying to have their essays appear in journals, Chinese and foreign press reported. At the same time, professors themselves can gain handsomely if their theses run in prestigious magazines. According to China Newsweek, Northwest Normal University in Gansu Province pays RMB 50,000 (USD 6,250) to any scholar whose academic writing appears in UK-based Nature Magazine. Publication in China's domestic key journals can earn a professor up to RMB 5,000 (USD 625).

China's Moral Health

¶9. (C) The fact that the issue has garnered so much press attention reflects concern in intellectual and

media circles about the moral state of Chinese society overall, said Zhou of Tsinghua. Moreover, regular Chinese have seized on the story, he said. "People view universities as the last bastion of honesty in Chinese society," he remarked, adding that the question then becomes, "if academia is corrupt, what does that say about our civic life overall?" For Zhou, the commotion over academic corruption will have two practical results. First, he plans to review his doctoral thesis, due this spring, in painstaking detail to make sure he has cited all his sources. Second, next semester, when he makes his initial foray into the classroom as a teacher, the first thing he will discuss with his students the importance of honest scholarship.

Comment

¶10. As the stakes increase for producing original research and writing in China, it is likely that more cases of academic corruption will surface. So far, it appears that the Internet has given Chinese intellectuals a tool to "self-police," and many appear all too happy to dig up dirt on colleagues, especially those who are academic rivals.

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